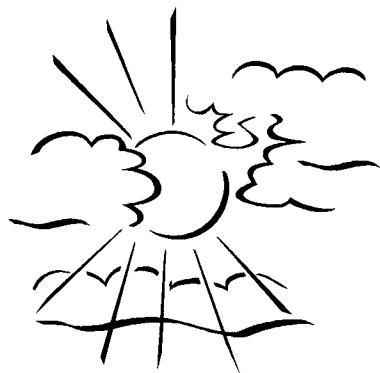


***Department
of
Human
Services***

Prepared by the
DHS Office of
Communications
(517) 373-7394



*Important story at this spot

Articles in Today's Clips

Tuesday, February 14, 2006

(Be sure to maximize your screen to read your clips)

TOPIC	PAGE
*Child Abuse/Neglect/Protection	2-15
Background Checks	16-18
Health Care	19-25
*Infant Mortality	26-29
Adult Foster Care	30
Heating Assistance	31-32
Homelessness	33
Domestic Violence	34-38
Child Support	39-40
Minimum Wage	41
Poverty	42
Early Childhood Development	43-44

Tuesday, February 14, 2006

Slain boy, siblings abused Records: State leaves kids with parents for months despite bruises, black eyes.

Karen Bouffard / The Detroit News

State child protection workers knew that 7-year-old Ricky Holland, whose parents are accused of his murder, and his siblings were being abused, but did not remove them from their home, court documents released Monday assert.

Personnel from a Jackson elementary school, which Ricky attended before moving to Williamston in April, told state workers that Ricky showed evidence of food deprivation and evidence of intentional and continued humiliation.

And according to prosecutors, state workers observed signs of physical abuse as recently as January in at least three of the family's surviving children, but did not remove them from their parents' care.

The documents, which will be admitted in Ingham County's attempt to convict Tim and Lisa Holland of Ricky's murder, detail allegations that the Michigan Department of Human Services refuses to acknowledge.

In fact, the state -- citing privacy laws -- has not even confirmed knowledge of Ricky, whose body was found in a ditch in rural Ingham County Jan. 27, more than a half year after he disappeared from his home, about 15 miles east of Lansing. The child's body has not been claimed for burial.

Tim Holland, 36, and Lisa Holland, 34, will appear for their preliminary hearing on open murder charges this week in Mason, the Ingham County seat.

The case has left Williamston reeling with grief, and raises questions about what might have been done to save the boy, who was reported missing July 2.

The Detroit News petitioned the court for documents concerning Ricky's siblings. The prosecutor's allegations of Ricky's abuse were also released Monday.

Among other injuries, the autopsy showed Ricky's collar bone, nose, shoulder blade and jaw were fractured. The cause of death has not been established, but detectives say Tim Holland told them that Lisa killed the child with two hammer blows to the head. He further told detectives that he disposed of the body at Lisa's direction and staged Ricky's room to make it appear that the boy had run away.

Tim Holland then took investigators to the remote site where the body was discovered. His wife maintains that Tim Holland killed Ricky.

According to court documents, officials at Cascades Elementary School in Jackson told detectives they had alerted state workers of their suspicions that Ricky was being abused. They said Ricky was made to wear diapers when he was far too old. Lisa brought him to school in a leash and harness and she sent carrot sandwiches for his school lunch, knowing he didn't like carrots. He came to school bruised.

"It seemed that it was a nasty, dysfunctional situation," Cascades Principal Ed Peterson told The News. "He was known, he was loved, and everybody tried very hard to work with him. He was endearing, not an easy child, but he was the kind you wanted to help."

The additional documents obtained by The News allege that abuse continued against Ricky's brothers and sisters, even as sheriff's deputies continued to search for him.

State workers observed signs of physical abuse dating back to October and as recently as January in at least three of Ricky's four siblings, Allison 1; Sam, 2; Kathryn, 3; and Joseph, 4. Ricky, and the other children except Allison, were adopted through the state foster care system.

In a visit to the Holland home in December, a state child protective services worker noticed that Joseph had a bruise on his back and a bruise and scratch on his thigh. Asked how he got the "owie on his back," he said: "Mommy did it and mommy hits." He said his mother hit him with a spatula and, with a doll, showed the worker how that was done.

In January, a worker noticed that Allison had a black eye, a bruise on her torso and bruises on her face. The worker noted that the little girl had been seen with black eyes before.

During the same visit, the worker noted a suspicious scratch on Sam's back.

The state claims it made a reasonable effort to avoid removing Ricky's siblings from the home by providing additional "parenting resource information and instruction," as well as "multiple hours of foster parent training" and meetings with school officials.

The Department of Human Services filed petitions with Ingham County Circuit Court Feb. 7, asking that the state assume temporary custody of the four surviving Holland children. They have been staying with relatives of Tim Holland since Jan. 24 when he filed a domestic abuse charge against his wife and fled the home with the children.

Elizabeth Carey, executive director of the Michigan Federation of Children and Family Agencies, said a shortage of funding and state workers means some families can fall through the cracks.

"The problem is when you're in a budget crises, it's hard to find money to allocate enough resources to wrap around these families to protect these kids," Carey said. "We are not putting children as a priority in our funding streams."

There is a trend in Michigan and nationwide to keep children in families even where abuse may have occurred, she said. But efforts to restore dysfunctional families to health require intensive intervention, she said.

"You don't want to remove children who shouldn't be removed, but at the same time, you have to have enough trained staff and enough budget to protect children well."

According to the petitions, Lisa Holland takes medication for an anxiety disorder.

The state has not requested that the Hollands' parental rights be terminated, leaving open the possibility that one or both of the parents could regain custody.

Like school employees, many neighbors say they suspected that Ricky was abused or neglected, and several had called the police or child protection workers to report their suspicions before Ricky's death.

They said the child appeared frail. He sneaked into neighbors' houses in search of food and begged not to be sent home. They said they never saw any of the Holland children playing outside, although the small street teemed with children.

Hundreds of people helped police search the Williamston area after Ricky's parents reported him missing over Fourth of July weekend. Helicopters, dive teams and K-9 units also searched.

You can reach Karen Bouffard at (734) 462-2206 or kbouffard@detnews.com.

The search for Ricky Holland

July 2, 2005: Timothy and Lisa Holland report Ricky missing; police find Ricky's bed pushed up to his bedroom window, and the window open. Parents say Ricky ran away.

July 3: Amber Alert issued. More than 100 volunteers and officers search for Ricky by foot and horseback. Dive teams, canine units and helicopters assist.

July 10: Ground search ends.

Jan. 24, 2006: Tim Holland accuses Lisa Holland of domestic abuse. She is arrested.

Jan. 27: Tim Holland leads sheriff's deputies to Ricky's body. Each parent blames the other for Ricky's death. They are arrested on charges of obstruction of justice and held as material witnesses.

Thursday: Tim and Lisa Holland are arraigned on murder charges.

February 14, 2006

Father told police mother killed Ricky with hammer Transcript released by judge details officer's testimony

By Kevin Grasha and Chris Andrews
Lansing State Journal

MASON - Tim Holland told police that his wife killed their 7-year-old son, Ricky, by striking him twice with a hammer, according to a transcript of a court hearing released Monday.

"Lisa killed Ricky Holland with two blows from a hammer to his head," according to testimony provided by Ingham County sheriff's Detective Sgt. Roy Holliday.

The testimony was given at a Feb. 7 hearing before 55th District Court Judge Thomas Boyd that led to Tim and Lisa Holland's arraignment on open murder charges.

Ricky was reported missing by his parents July 2, prompting a massive search. His remains were found last month in rural Ingham County.

Holliday further testified that Tim Holland went on to admit during a Jan. 27 interview that he disposed of Ricky's body at his wife's direction. But in an interview a day earlier - according to the transcript - Lisa Holland said it was Tim Holland who killed their son and that she cleaned up the scene of the slaying.

District Judge Rosemarie Aqui-lina on Monday ordered the transcript be made public, despite objections from the Ingham County Prosecutor's Office and defense attorneys.

Motion filed

The Lansing State Journal and WILX-TV had filed a motion challenging Boyd's order that shut out the media when Holliday testified Feb. 7.

In releasing the transcript, Aqui-lina said the public showed intense interest in Ricky after he was reported missing in July.

She said it is in the public interest that proceedings are open.

Prosecutor Stuart Dunning III on Monday said he disagreed with the judge's decision and will decide today whether to appeal.

He said facts that become public, which may not be admissible in court, could make it more difficult to field an impartial jury.

"I certainly hope the State Journal and WILX-TV will help defray the costs to the taxpayers of Ingham County if we end up trying the case in another venue," he said.

Dunning said his main concern is that the Hollands receive a fair trial.

"Defense attorneys just have to win. Prosecuting attorneys have to ensure a fair trial - and hope as a result, they win," he said.

Lisa Holland's attorney, Andrew Abood, said Holliday's testimony should not be considered evidence - only a theory about what might have happened to Ricky - and would not be admissible in court.

Abood said he is looking forward to the Feb. 28 preliminary hearing, which will determine if there is enough evidence for the case to go to trial.

"It gives us the opportunity to examine the evidence and examine the sources of their theory," he said. "Ultimately, we don't think there's going to be probable cause that my client committed a crime."

Frank Reynolds, who is representing Tim Holland, did not return several messages seeking comment.

School suspicious

According to the transcript released Monday, Holliday also testified that investigators found evidence of mental and physical abuse toward Ricky by his parents:

- Ricky's blood was found in several areas of the Hollands' home during the police investigation, including on the boy's clothes.
- Lisa Holland would use a leash on Ricky when she took him to school.
- School personnel suspected physical and mental abuse by the Hollands.

The Hollands became Ricky's foster parents in the fall of 2000 when he was 3, they told the State Journal in a September interview.

They lived in Jackson until moving to Williamston in the spring of 2005.

The Hollands said Ricky attended school in Jackson through first grade and that they had home-schooled him since then.

During the seven-month search for Ricky, volunteers scoured the region looking for a trace of the missing boy. His case was featured in an episode of "America's Most Wanted," and Ricky's photograph was displayed prominently on the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's Web site.

In September, Tim Holland said: "Every morning, I get up and tell myself that today will be the day Rick will walk through the door ... and our lives will slowly return to whatever normal is."

Contact Kevin Grasha at 267-1347 or kgrasha@lsj.com. Contact Chris Andrews at 377-1054 or candrews@lsj.com.

Adoptive Parents Blame Each Other For Boy's Death

Ricky Holland Reported Missing Last Summer

POSTED: 9:07 am EST February 14, 2006

MASON, Mich. -- The adoptive parents of a slain 7-year-old boy have accused each other of killing him, according to a transcript of a court hearing that was released Monday.

Ricky Holland (pictured), of Williamston, was reported missing July 2, prompting a large-scale search. His remains were found in rural Ingham County on Jan. 27.

After his body was found, his parents were charged with obstruction of justice. Earlier this month, Tim Holland, 36, and Lisa Holland, 34, were charged with open counts of murder. They have pleaded not guilty.

Authorities Monday released a transcript of the Feb. 7 hearing before 55th District Court Judge Thomas Boyd.

It quoted Ingham County sheriff's Detective Sgt. Roy Holliday as saying that Tim Holland told investigators that his wife killed Ricky with two hammer blows to the head, according to published reports.

Lisa Holland told police that her husband killed their son and she cleaned up the scene of the slaying, the transcript said.

On Monday, District Judge Rosemarie Aquilina ordered the release of the transcript over the objections of prosecutors and defense lawyers. News organizations had challenged the partial closing of the hearing and sought the release of the transcript.

Lisa Holland's lawyer, Andrew Abood, said Holliday's testimony should not be considered evidence and would not be admissible in court. He said he was looking forward to a Feb. 28 preliminary hearing to determine if there is enough evidence for a trial.

The documents released Monday also showed that officials at Cascades Elementary School in Jackson, where the family lived until April, alerted state workers that they suspected Ricky was being abused.

The state Department of Human Services on Feb. 7 asked Ingham County Circuit Court to give the state temporary custody of the couple's four surviving children, who have been staying with relatives.

Gaertner: Baby shows signs of improving

STACY LANGLEY, The Huron Daily Tribune

02/13/2006

BAD AXE — The investigation into the cause of serious head injuries to a 1-month-old baby boy sustained just a week ago at a Bad Axe apartment remains a top priority for law enforcement officials today.

According to Huron County Prosecutor Mark J. Gaertner, the baby is still in the care of Hurley Medical Center in Flint, but as of Saturday afternoon was showing a slight improvement in his health.

"The baby is not yet out of the woods," said Gaertner. "There's been an improvement in his condition, but only a tad bit. He's now breathing on his own."

Gaertner isn't releasing details about the case but said he, along with Huron County Sheriff's investigators, have been working the case around the clock to get to the bottom of possible allegations of child abuse involving the baby.

The baby boy, whose name is not being released, was born Jan. 9. He is one of two children born to the Bad Axe couple. Gaertner isn't releasing details about the parents but said the 1-year-old child is in foster care at this time.

Law enforcement officials began their investigation after a 9-1-1 call from the baby's 23-year-old father reported the baby boy was having trouble breathing at the North Van Dyke apartment just before 11 a.m. Feb. 4.

The baby was transported by ambulance to Huron Medical Center in Bad Axe Sunday morning and then taken to Hurley Medical Center where he remains today.

Anyone with information about the baby boy is asked to contact the Huron County Sheriff's Office or Huron Central Dispatch as soon as possible.

©Huron Daily Tribune 2006

Dad Guilty Of Stomping 5-Year-Old To Death

POSTED: 8:57 am EST February 14, 2006

KEY WEST, Fla. -- A Florida man has been convicted of murder and child abuse in the death of his young son.

A jury deliberated just two hours before finding Christopher Bennett, 31, guilty of stomping his 5-year-old, Zachary, to death in April 2003. The boy died of a ruptured liver, a bleeding brain and broken ribs.

A report from Florida's social service agency said the boy never should have been placed in his father's care. Bennett has a long arrest record for battery, domestic violence and selling cocaine. After less than two hours of jury deliberation, Bennett was found guilty of first-degree murder and aggravated child abuse.

Bennett's sentencing phase begins April 4.

In 2004 the mother and great-grandmother of Zachary Bennett settled a civil suit with the Department of Children and Families for \$160,000 after the agency placed the boy in the care of his father despite the man's long, violent criminal record.

Copyright 2006 by The Associated Press.

Doctor testifies in murder case

Tuesday, February 14, 2006

By Steven Hepker
shepker@citpat.com -- 768-4923

A jury Monday viewed projected color pictures of a toddler whose head was so damaged that blood pooled inside her skull.

"Could be a punch, could be a kick, could be struck on the side of a table," forensic pathologist Dr. Ruben Ortiz-Reyes testified under questioning by Assistant Prosecutor Allison Bates.

The doctor said 14-month-old Amaree Gail Mathis died of blunt-force trauma to the top of her head and that the manner was homicide.

Prosecutors allege her father, Shawndale M. Clark, struck or pushed her into a hard surface on the night of June 16 or early June 17 while the girl's mother was out.

He is charged with open murder and child abuse. The jury will be instructed on second-degree murder, rather than first-degree, premeditated murder.

Defense attorney George Lyons will attempt to convince the jury the baby died accidentally, and that her father did not know she was mortally injured when he put her to bed.

However, Ortiz-Reyes said the extent of damage to Amaree's brain was not something easily caused by a fall.

"There had to be a lot of force to do it," Ortiz-Reyes said. Such as a fall from a second floor to the ground, he said.

The victim also had bruising to her face, abrasions on her forehead, and a broken rib, he said.

Clark and the mother, Jacqueline Mathis, said they discovered the girl dead at 9:30 a.m. the next morning.

She had died eight to 12 hours earlier, Ortiz-Reyes estimated.

Clark, 26, moved in with Mathis at Pheasant Run Apartments a week before the death. Police said Clark was cited for nonsupport of another child.

Jury acquits day-care owner in infant's death

Trace Christenson

The Battle Creek Enquirer

Melissa Whitfield turned to her family in the front row of the courtroom and moments later embraced them in tears.

After two hours of jury deliberations and more than two years after the death of a child in her day-care center, Whitfield, 27, was acquitted Monday of involuntary manslaughter.

A Calhoun County Circuit Court jury of six men and six women considered the case Monday morning before finding Whitfield not guilty in the Oct. 27, 2003, death of 12-week-old Blake Wilson.

The child died of positional asphyxiation after a pathologist determined the child's head slumped forward, cutting off his airway while he was in a swing at Melissa's Day Care at 235 Eldred St.

Jurors listened to testimony for four days last week before beginning their deliberations about 8:30 a.m. Monday. They notified the court they reached a verdict at 10:45 a.m.

Jurors left without comment to either lawyer or reporters. Whitfield and her family also declined to comment.

Spencer and Sarah Wilson, the parents of the child, sat in the back row of the courtroom during the announcement of the verdict and then left the courthouse without speaking to anyone.

Later Monday, in a statement, Spencer Wilson said, "This has been a very hard time for my wife, myself, and our family. Sarah and I would like to thank Assistant Prosecutor Deirdre Ford, and the late Detective LaVern Brann for giving Blake a voice when he could not speak for himself. I know Blake's death was not intentional but it could have been prevented."

Ford argued to the jury that Whitfield was guilty of failure to provide adequate day care when she allowed the child to sit in the swing for between nine and 20 minutes while she talked with her mother.

But defense attorney Susan Mladenoff countered by saying the death was a tragic accident but not a criminal offense.

Mladenoff said after the verdict that the jurors had a difficult decision to make.

"They gave it a lot of thought and based on the circumstances, they reached the appropriate decision."

Prosecutor John Hallacy said the case was tough.

"Anytime there is a death of a child, of anyone, it is a difficult case. We felt it was a case to bring and to present to the jury."

He said prosecutors were attempting to show there was more than simple negligence involved.

Hallacy said prosecutors disagreed with some of the rulings by Judge Conrad Sindt, including not to allow evidence that Whitfield's CPR

certification had lapsed, "but those are the rulings that you deal with." Whitfield and her husband, Jerry, were charged in February 2005 with the death but charges against Jerry Whitfield later were dismissed by a district court judge.

The couple were found guilty in October 2004 in district court of a misdemeanor charge of operating an unlicensed day care after prosecutors alleged they continued to care for children after the state revoked their license following the death of Blake Wilson.

And Melissa Whitfield still faces 11 counts of welfare fraud after allegedly collecting \$40,000 from the Family Independence Agency for children in the day care between 2001 and 2003. That trial is tentatively scheduled for April.

In his statement, Spencer Wilson said, "We will never forget Blake and we will love him forever. I hope parents take time to love and appreciate the great gift of a child because you never think it will happen to you."

Trace Christenson covers crime and courts. He can be reached at 966-0685 or tchrist@battlecr.gannett.com.

Originally published February 14, 2006

Missing Detroit Toddler Found Safe

Amber Alert Canceled

POSTED: 5:22 pm EST February 13, 2006

UPDATED: 8:57 am EST February 14, 2006

An Amber Alert issued for a 2-year-old Detroit boy has been canceled.

Tyhiem Boyd was reported missing at about 4 p.m. Monday by his foster mom, according to Michigan State Police. Police believed the boy's mother, Natarsha McLeod, 21, took him.

Tyhiem was found Monday night in Newcastle County, Delaware, Local 4 learned. He was with his mother and paternal grandmother, according to the station.

The boy was placed in protective custody. Social services were expected to pick him up Tuesday, the station learned.

Police continue to investigate.

Copyright 2006 by ClickOnDetroit.com.

Monday, February 13, 2006

Fordson teacher to stand trial He's accused of sexually assaulting two boys during a sleepover at his Melvindale home.

Ronald J. Hansen / The Detroit News

ALLEN PARK -- Kelvin Craig McCormack was a trusted associate pastor, wrestling coach, teacher and a friend, a 15-year-old Dearborn boy said Monday.

But at a September sleepover at McCormack's Melvindale home, the boy said, the former Fordson High School teacher fondled his chest and thigh.

Another 15-year-old who was also spending that night with his coach said McCormack slipped into bed with him and groped his buttocks.

It was enough for 24th District Judge John Courtright to order McCormack, 46, to stand trial on two counts of second-degree criminal sexual conduct. It also serves as another black eye for the state's educators, who are fighting in court in Lansing to prevent the disclosure of a list of employees suspected of having criminal records.

"I woke up and felt Kelvin rubbing the back of my thigh," the first boy told Courtright. "I stayed still. I tried to figure out what was happening. I didn't know what to do."

During McCormack's preliminary examination, authorities alluded to a complaint made by the second boy that McCormack also groped him on an earlier wrestling trip to North Dakota.

McCormack, who has no previous criminal record, is not facing charges in North Dakota, authorities said.

Fordson High School officials suspended McCormack after learning of the allegations in September. McCormack later resigned. He was hired at the school in 2001 and taught history and coached the wrestling and football teams.

On Monday, he sat impassively through the hearing.

Parents for each of the ninth-graders had agreed to let their sons spend the night with McCormack at the start of Labor Day weekend, the boys said.

McCormack has worked as an associate pastor at Dearborn Assembly of God Church. The church could not be reached for comment Monday.

The boys, who are not brothers, offered conflicting testimony at times, including about whether McCormack immediately joined them in bed.

They also disagreed about what happened earlier in the evening. One said they had dinner with him and their parents at a Red Robin restaurant; the other said they ate pizza at McCormack's house and watched a Pistons game.

But each maintained the teacher touched him in bed and both said they shifted about in bed to stop the fondling. One said McCormack eventually left their bedroom, went into the bathroom and didn't return to their room until morning.

The first boy said he told his parents about the incident the next day, which led to an investigation. The second boy initially said there wasn't any wrongdoing, then recanted and accused McCormack of fondling him.

McCormack's trial in Wayne County Circuit Court has not yet been scheduled.

You can reach Ronald J. Hansen at (313) 222-2019 or rhansen@detnews.com.

Teen Outsmarts Fake Cop

By Anu Prakash

Web produced by Sarah Morgan

February 14, 2006

Clinton Township police weren't sure what a man posing as a cop was trying to do when he pulled over a teenage girl over the weekend, but they want to catch him before he has a chance to hurt anyone.

Around 5 or 6 p.m., the 17-year-old girl was driving on Clinton River road near 17 Mile when she was pulled over by a man in a black car that had a red light on top. The man was wearing a black uniform.

He approached the teen and asked how fast she was going. She said 42 mph. The man said she was speeding and the teen asked if she was being pulled over for going 2 miles over the speed limit.

According to Clinton Township Police Captain Bruce Wade, the man told the girl he pulled her over because he thought she was cute. The man asked what her weight was, if she had naturally curly hair, how old she was and if she went to high school.

When the girl asked him for identification, the man said "have a nice day" and left.

Police want to remind drivers that if they are suspicious of someone pulling them over, to drive into a well lit area with people around.

School worker list

State must be fully accurate about criminal histories

FLINT

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Tuesday, February 14, 2006

The Ingham County judge who blocked release of names of school employees alleged to have criminal pasts hasn't forever prevented the sought-after list from eventually finding its way to daylight.

First, however, the state Department of Education must figure out how to be accurate with this list, whereas now it is anything but. Ruling in a court action forced by the Michigan Education Association to protect employees' reputations, the judge found the list literally riddled with inaccuracies.

For the state to publicly besmirch the good name of even one innocent person amounts to malicious negligence. Once information begins circulating, there is no way to call it back or even completely refute it, no matter how preposterously based. Pressure is even higher on the people in this matter, who rely on their right to affiliate with children as their means of livelihood.

The basic rationale for drawing up the list is a highly defensible one, which led to adopting a state law whose purpose is to see that sexual predators and other criminals not be allowed to work in schools. Eventually, all school employees will be fingerprinted for background checks in compliance with the law, but in the interim couple of years, the Department of Education will run twice-a-year checks trying to match names, birth dates, Social Security numbers and other identifying data on employees against known criminals in order to purge potentially dangerous ones or at least reveal their presence.

The first check, which produced the list Ingham County Judge Joyce Draganchuk has blocked, included a Clio School District teacher who was irrationally tied to a Tennessee woman convicted of supplying alcohol to minors. Turns out the two women do not even bear the same name, let alone any other identifying data that match up.

Such abject sloppiness not only can do irreparable harm to people's good names, but undercuts a vital program for keeping predators away from schoolchildren. The immediate goal after this severe embarrassment for the state is to re-establish credibility with a true and reliable list, no room for errors permitted. And it needs to happen fast.

Published February 14, 2006

[From the Lansing State Journal]

Melot: Teachers suffer; leaders skate Governor, Legislature don't have to worry about little people

A program designed to tell parents about the character of Michigan teachers is proving quite illuminating, instead, about the character of Michigan lawmakers.

And the picture sure ain't pretty.

Of course, the program in question is the state's new requirement to conduct regular criminal background checks of school employees. As sold by Gov. Jennifer Granholm, House Speaker Craig DeRoche and their colleagues, this was all about making sure some sex offender isn't roaming your kid's campus.

For year one, the Michigan State Police had in hand its own quick review of educators' records. This information was turned over to local school officials, who were supposed to inform employees of their history and take appropriate action.

This process, though, has produced plenty of error; so much that the Michigan Education Association convinced a local judge to keep the records from public eyes until they are better vetted.

That didn't stop some educators from being falsely accused of having criminal records in the meantime.

Not to worry, campers. Granholm has an easy fix. As she told the LSJ Editorial Board last Friday, all these wrongly accused teachers have to do is show up at the nearest state police post and have their fingerprints taken. That way they can prove their own innocence.

Granholm was much less forthcoming on the appropriateness of forcing innocent teachers to prove they aren't criminals. She feels bad about such mistakes, but hey, they happen, right?

Not exactly.

Even now, the state police are gearing up for another review of the records; a review they told the Detroit News will "drastically reduce" the error rate.

This review could have been done by the state in the beginning. But thanks to Granholm, DeRoche & Co., that work was pushed off on local school districts. The state did one search, than the schools were supposed to do a more thorough job on any hits.

So, when Granholm told the LSJ, "I wish I could tell you why the list is not better," state residents are left with two unpleasant choices:

- The governor is truly clueless about this program and really doesn't know why the list is a wreck.
- The governor knows what's going on - knows she and the Legislature have displayed outrageous incompetence - and would prefer for us all to ignore it.

Now, in the governor's defense, no one has successfully accused her of being clueless. So readers can come to their own conclusions.

But don't fret, little people. Even an error of arrogance this mammoth isn't going to produce any sleepless nights in Lansing.

After all, it's not like a poorly planned state program accuses individual lawmakers of being criminals - and requires them to prove their own innocence.

It's not like voters will avail themselves of Michigan's recall law to relieve the state of this incompetence.

It's not like individual lawmakers will have to hire their own attorneys to defend them against litigation for these false accusations.

No, the Capitol crowd will glide on, hiding behind governmental immunity and their solemn statements to voters that they meant to do right ... and mean to do better, next time.

They've learned from their suffering, right?

What do you think? Write Derek Melot, Lansing State Journal, 120 E. Lenawee St., Lansing, MI 48919. For past columns, visit www.lsj.com/columnists.

Granholm signs health care bill

Monday, February 13, 2006

THE SAGINAW NEWS

LANSING -- Gov. Jennifer M. Granholm has signed legislation aimed at saving counties money on the cost of inmate health care.

Sen. Mike Goschka, a Brant Republican, sponsored the legislation, which was unanimously approved by both the Senate and House. Rep. Roger Kahn, a Saginaw Township Republican, introduced the legislation in the House.

The law requires that medical professionals providing services to jail inmates seek payment from the inmates' insurance companies before billing the county.

Previously, counties had to pay inmates' medical expenses up front, then seek reimbursement from insurance providers.

Saginaw County Sheriff Charles L. Brown and Saginaw County Board of Commissioners member Ann Doyle had encouraged Goschka to introduce the legislation.

Editorials

February 14, 2006
Detroit Free Press

Healthy Pursuit

Federal funds can boost coverage and state business

Keeping more people healthy and covered by insurance has to be part and parcel of Michigan's efforts to rebuild a get-up-and-go economy. That's why lawmakers and others ought to join Gov. Jennifer Granholm's efforts to pry money out of the federal government to help cover the uninsured.

Granholm wants to get the federal government to match money that the Department of Community Health already spends on other programs, so the insurance plan would come at no additional cost to state taxpayers. The result would be health insurance offered at relatively low cost to residents, either individually or through small businesses that otherwise can't afford such benefits.

The coverage might end up being relatively bare-bones, with a sliding scale of payments depending on family income. But having the insurance would encourage people to see a doctor before an illness worsens, and maintain good routines for chronic diseases such as diabetes, rather than waiting for a crisis that lands them in the emergency room or, worse, a hospital bed. When the uninsured end up there, it's not just a sign that people are being failed, it also drains the health care system and ultimately shows up in everyone else's bills for treatment, insurance and taxes.

In her visit to the Free Press Monday (see Q&A on the facing page), Granholm said such a program would help right the imbalance of federal dollars flowing from here to Washington and never returning. In 2004, only four states got less money per person from Washington, according to State Policy Reports. That includes below-average help with Medicaid, which helps the poor and disabled maintain their health.

But part of the problem also is the gap that exists between qualifying for Medicaid and having health-care insurance on the job. A low-cost insurance plan could help entrepreneurs take financial risks without jeopardizing their health and help small businesses retain employees. That creates healthy workers -- and workers with fewer worries about their health care -- to make this state go.

Rules of Medicare Drug Plans Slow Access to Benefits

By ROBERT PEAR
The New York Times

Published: February 14, 2006

WASHINGTON, Feb. 13 — Doctors and pharmacists say many drugs theoretically covered by the new Medicare drug benefit are not readily available because of insurers' restrictions and requirements.

The benefit is administered by scores of companies under contract to Medicare. Each plan has its own list of covered drugs, known as a formulary. Drug plans require doctors and patients to obtain "prior authorization" for certain drugs on their formularies.

The procedures vary by plan. One plan may have 25 or 30 forms for prior authorization for different drugs. Most states have at least 40 Medicare drug plans.

Doctors say the diverse requirements are onerous and can delay or deny access to needed medications. But insurers say the requirements save money and promote the proper use of the medications.

Dr. Jeffery A. Kerr, who cares for hundreds of older patients in southern Missouri, said: "Medicare drug plans have created significant hurdles that patients and physicians must jump over before getting their medications. The prescription drug plans are playing a dangerous game. In many cases, we're dealing with frail, very vulnerable individuals."

For years, commercial insurers and their pharmacy benefit managers have used similar techniques. But Dr. Kerr said the techniques used by some Medicare plans were more onerous and restrictive. They are also more noticeable, he added, because Medicare beneficiaries are high users of prescription drugs.

Dr. Steven A. Levenson of Towson, Md., president-elect of the American Medical Directors Association, which represents doctors who care for nursing home residents, said, "We have seen signs that Medicare drug plans are using management controls to deter access to medically appropriate drugs, including drugs on their own formularies."

Ross W. Brickley, a pharmacist in Kinston, N.C., said he had requested prior authorizations for hundreds of drugs taken by Medicare patients in more than 20 plans, each with its own policies, forms and procedures.

"We have a world of chaos," Mr. Brickley said.

David W. Bernauer, chairman of Walgreen, one of the biggest drugstore chains, echoed that concern.

"It is impossible for pharmacists to keep track of all these formularies" and prior authorizations, Mr. Bernauer said.

The government, he added, "should use its leverage to promote greater standardization of policies and procedures."

In his radio address on Saturday, President Bush described the drug benefit as "a good deal for seniors." Those who enroll "will end up spending about half of what they used to spend on prescription drugs each year," Mr. Bush said.

Yet he acknowledged that problems had occurred.

"Some people had trouble the first time they went to the pharmacy after enrolling," Mr. Bush said. "Information for some beneficiaries was not transferred smoothly between Medicare, drug plans and the states. And in the early days of the drug coverage, waiting times were far too long." Several insurance executives said they had not realized that their companies required doctors to use many different forms for prior authorizations. "That can't be right," Francis S. Soistman Jr., executive vice president of Coventry Health Care, said when asked about the forms on his company's Web site. The site has 39 forms for doctors to use when prescribing certain drugs for Coventry Medicare plans, marketed under the name AdvantraRx.

At the top of each form is a logo that says, "AdvantraRx: Medicare prescription drug plans made easy."

After checking with Coventry pharmacists, Mr. Soistman said the forms were justified because "each drug requiring prior authorization has unique clinical criteria that must be met." The forms, he said, "serve as a checklist of necessary information needed for our review."

More generally, Mr. Soistman said, prior authorization limits the use of drugs with a potential for abuse like OxyContin and drugs with safety problems like Accutane, an acne treatment that can cause birth defects. In addition, he said, prior authorization is a way to prevent the overuse of high-cost medications and to ensure that "equally effective, less expensive agents are used first." In its prior authorization forms, Coventry requires doctors to provide details of laboratory test results, "all office notes" and other data to show why certain drugs are needed.

For an osteoporosis drug, Forteo, the company wants to know the patient's bone mineral density, as measured by the "T score." For some AIDS drugs, the doctor has to specify the "viral load" and white blood cell count. In requesting approval for certain antifungal drugs, the doctor must provide a laboratory report identifying the species of the infectious agent.

Other Medicare plans focus on other drugs. The four principal drugs for Alzheimer's disease are all subject to prior authorization under some plans, including ones offered by RxAmerica, a subsidiary of Longs Drug Stores.

Some companies require doctors to report the patient's score on a mental examination before covering certain drugs for Alzheimer's. Insurers say the test is needed to decide whether a patient is likely to benefit.

Dr. Daniel C. Lyons, senior vice president of Independence Blue Cross, said his company used "one standard prior authorization form" for its Medicare drug plans, sold in 13 states under the name AmeriHealth. He later confirmed that the company also had 17 forms for high-cost injectable drugs to treat complex conditions like cancer, hemophilia, H.I.V. infection and rheumatoid arthritis.

In an interview, Dr. Lyons said it would be desirable to "simplify and standardize the prior authorization process."

Dr. Mark B. McClellan, administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, said last week that the program was "working smoothly for the vast majority of beneficiaries." He promised to repair problems within a few weeks.

"Plans are filling over a million prescriptions a day," Dr. McClellan said. "We are seeing improvements on a daily basis."

Medicare officials approved all the formularies last year. A former Medicare official, Babette S. Edgar, said the government had analyzed not only the lists of covered drugs, but also the tools to regulate access to those drugs.

In the last year, the administration repeatedly assured beneficiaries that they would have convenient access to "all medically necessary drugs," though it gave insurers some leeway to define medical necessity.

Officials have developed a model form for beneficiaries to request coverage or prior authorization for a drug. The administration emphasized that "use of this model form is optional." A "Medicare drug plan may require additional information or documentation," it added.

For more than a decade, health plans have been encouraging the use of generic drugs, mail-order pharmacy service and other techniques to control the costs of drug benefits. The efforts appear to be paying off for insurers and employers. The growth of prescription drug spending slowed to 8.2 percent in 2004, after nine years of double-digit increases, the government reported last month.

On the commercial side, insurers typically charge higher co-payments for certain drugs. But federal law limits charges for low-income Medicare beneficiaries. Medicare drug plans use other techniques.

"The use of prior authorization is far more prevalent in Medicare than in commercial insurance programs," said John Feather, executive director of the American Society of Consultant Pharmacists, whose 7,000 members specialize in drug care for the elderly.

Most drug plans say they cover more than 90 of the 100 drugs that Medicare beneficiaries commonly use. Dr. Charles A. Crecelius, a geriatrician in St. Louis, said, "Several of my patients were totally fooled" by such assurances.

A drug may be on the formulary but difficult to obtain because of the prior authorization and other rules, Dr. Crecelius said.

Accessing health care

Nick Schirripa
The Enquirer

The Calhoun Health Plan opened its doors Jan. 1 to uninsured county residents such as Karen Baker.

Baker, 53, has been unemployed for a few months after leaving a job at the Pancake House to watch her two grandchildren. Similar to about 4,500 other Calhoun County residents, Baker doesn't have any health insurance.

"They say we have a history of cancer in our family.

My husband died of cancer and my son's cancer is in remission right now," she said. "And I haven't had the money to have my eyes tested in over five years."

Struggling with poor eyesight and the fear of serious health issues, Baker turned to the Calhoun Health Plan for help.

The health plan began in 2005 as a resource for uninsured and underinsured county residents, according to officials, and more than 1,250 people have enrolled in the plan's two programs since Sept. 1.

Samantha Pearl, Calhoun Health Plan executive director, said more than 1,100 people have enrolled in Plan A, which pairs local health-care services and resources with state Medicaid funding.

Plan B offers basic coverage for medical services, including doctor visits, specialist evaluations and X-rays, Pearl said, and applicants must have a household income at or below 150 percent of federal poverty levels.

For a single person, 150 percent of the 2006 federal poverty level translates into an annual income of \$14,700. The threshold increases \$5,100 for each additional member of a household.

Enrollees are responsible for some co-payments, including \$5 for each doctor visit, \$5 for generic drugs and \$10 for brand-name drugs.

Officials said Plan B is federally funded with a match this year of \$1.31 for every \$1 the county spends on indigent health care.

This year, the health plan has a \$500,000 contract with the county health department for certain services, such as breast cancer screening, family planning and immunizations, officials said. Based on that contract amount, the federal government has funded the health plan with an additional \$650,000.

Since enrollment opened Jan. 1 for Plan B, Pearl said, about 150 people have enrolled.

"These are typically people working one, two or three part-time jobs, working for an employer who doesn't offer health benefits, or for an employer who does offer benefits but they can't afford the employee's share," she said.

Baker said she was reluctant to reach out to the health plan for assistance, but she's glad she did.

"I had a real struggle going in there. My pride got in the way," she said. "I think it's great. It's a real easy plan to get into."

Kate Segal, county board vice chairwoman and president of the health plan board, said it's important for people to recognize the difference between the Calhoun

Health Plan and health insurance.

"The health plan is not health insurance. It is basic health-care coverage," she said. "Insurance traditionally provides more coverage, and what the health plan offers is a basic health-care package that helps you get access to the preventative care you need."

Segal said a lack of preventative care, the medical attention people need in the early stages of illness, ends up increasing health-care costs because of the expensive emergency care used by the uninsured.

The health plan helps people without insurance get the care they need without driving up the costs of medical care, Segal said, which is caused by health care providers increasing their costs to consumers to recover expenses from treating the uninsured.

"It gets people the treatment they need at the onset of an illness, and it also helps keep people out of emergency rooms by giving them access to preventative care," she said. "The more coverage we can provide for people and the less emergency rooms are used, the less expensive health care will be for people who pay for health insurance."

Segal said a recent study showed Michigan families and employers pay hundreds of dollars more each year for insurance coverage because of the number of uninsured people seeking emergency medical attention.

The Calhoun Health Plan is planning to add another service March 1 when it is expected to merge with the Prescription Drug Access Program.

PDAP gives low-income residents access to reduced-cost or free medications, Pearl said, and last year distributed more than \$1 million in drugs to between 1,200 and 1,500 people.

Officials said the integration of the health plan and prescription program will increase the access to necessary medications for health plan participants.

Pearl said the Calhoun Health Plan eventually would like to offer Plan C, also called the "third-share program," which is aimed at small businesses that cannot offer health insurance to employees.

In that program, the cost of health insurance is evenly divided between the Calhoun Health Plan, the employer and the employee.

Nick Schirripa covers Calhoun County and Marshall. He can be reached at 966-0692 or nschirrip@battlecr.gannett.com. Read his blog in the News Extras area at battlecreekenquirer.com.

Originally published February 14, 2006

Tuesday, February 14, 2006

Infant death rate drops in Michigan Although incidence falls to lowest point ever, rate for black babies barely changes.

Charles E. Ramirez / The Detroit News

The death rate for infants in Michigan fell to a record low last year -- but the death rate declined just slightly for black infants.

"After many years of collaborative efforts to decrease infant mortality, Michigan recorded in 2004 its lowest rate ever of 7.6 per 1,000 live births," said Janet Olszewski, director of the Michigan Department of Community Health, in a statement Monday.

The department released figures for 2004 infant mortality rates for the state Monday and it was down more than 10 percent from 8.5 per 1,000 live births in 2003, according to the department. The infant mortality rate is the number of deaths of infants under the age of 1 per 1,000 live births.

The reason the figure is important is "it represents an index of our well-being," said Dr. Seth Foldy, associate clinical professor of family and community medicine at the Medical College of Wisconsin.

"It's a basic, vital statistic and one of the few measures that's comparable around the world," said Foldy, who was Milwaukee's health commissioner from 1998 to 2004.

The national average was 7.0 per 1,000 live births in 2002, according to the latest figures from the National Center for Health Statistics.

"The country has seen lower infant mortality rates for the last several consecutive years," he said. "However, there is still a huge lag on the part of African-Americans."

The number of infant deaths in Michigan totaled 984 in 2004, down 11.5 percent from 1,112 in 2003.

The death rate among white infants fell 22.4 percent to 5.2 per 1,000 live births in 2004 from 6.7 per 1,000 live births a year earlier.

The rate for African-American infants fell slightly. In 2004, the rate was 17.3 per 1,000 live births -- 1 percent lower than a year earlier.

A Detroit News analysis in 2004 found that for every 1,000 black children born in suburban Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties, 19 don't survive their first year.

It further found that among black children born in Detroit, 17 of 1,000 don't live past their first birthday.

T.J. Bucholz, a spokesman for the state's health department, said the state effort's to reduce infant mortality rates are helping -- but still have a way to go to improve the survival rates for black children.

"There's a disparity between the mortality rates among African-American and white infants," he said. "We have more work to do."

Experts say programs that educate mothers about the importance of taking care of themselves during their pregnancy, proper nutrition for infants and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome have helped reduce infant mortality rates.

MIRS

February 13, 2006

Infant Mortality Lowest On State Record

The number of infant deaths is at the lowest recorded level in state history but the state should pay close attention to disparities between deaths of African American babies and white babies, warned the Department of Community Health (DCH).

The infant mortality rate is the number of deaths of infants under one-year-old per 1,000 live births. This is a standard used worldwide to measure health status.

In 2004, 128 fewer babies died than in 2003 with the overall number of infant deaths declining from 1,112 in 2003 to 984 in 2004, said DCH Director Janet **OLSZEWSKI**.

White infant mortality rates decreased from 6.7 per 1,000 live births in 2003 to 5.2 per 1,000 live births in 2004 however, African American infant mortality rates decreased from 17.5 per 1,000 births in 2003 to 17.3 per 1,000 live births in 2004.

"We are making progress at reducing our rate of infant death in the African American community, but certainly, more work needs to be done to combat disparities," Olszewski said. "I am hopeful and confident that we can seriously address this critical issue through our many efforts designed to address improving birth outcomes, particularly for African American families."

The state's overall mortality rate in 2004 was 7.6 per 1,000 live births compared to 8.5 per 1,000 live births in 2003.

The DCH is working in areas with the highest infant mortality rates to bring the rates down, the director said. The DCH is interviewing mothers about their prenatal and postnatal behaviors, looking at whether the deaths could have been preventable, ensuring at-risk pregnant women are seeking pre-natal care and making other resources available to expecting parents, she added.

Published February 14, 2006

[From the Lansing State Journal]

Community news briefs

Infant mortality rate lowest for state in '04

Michigan's infant mortality rate dropped to its lowest rate on record in 2004, state health officials said Monday.

"After many years of collaborative efforts to decrease infant mortality, Michigan recorded in 2004 its lowest rate ever of 7.6 (deaths) per thousand live births, a testament to the hard work going on at both the state and local levels," state Community Health director Janet Olszewski said in a release.

The rate was down from 8.5 deaths per thousand live births in 2003. Rates for whites improved more than for blacks, with the white infant mortality rate dropping from 6.7 deaths per thousand live births in 2003 to 5.2 in 2004. The black infant mortality rate decreased from 17.5 deaths per thousand live births in 2003 to 17.3 in 2004.

Flint's infant mortality highest

GENESEE COUNTY

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Tuesday, February 14, 2006

By Shantell M. Kirkendol

lskirkendoll@flintjournal.com • 810.766.6366

GENESEE COUNTY - Flint had the highest infant mortality rate among Michigan cities in 2004, even as infant deaths statewide fell to a record low, according to the state Department of Community Health.

The city recorded a rate of 15.9 infant deaths for every 1,000 live births, while the number statewide declined to a rate of 7.6.

Infant mortality is a measure of how many babies reach their first birthday.

Despite efforts to support mothers and newborns, Genesee County's infant death rate was 12.4, slightly higher than in 2003, when the rate was 11.3.

There is a margin for error in the numbers; for Flint's 2004 rate, it's plus or minus 4.9 points.

In 2004, only Branch County's overall rate of 13.5 deaths for every 1,000 births was higher than Genesee County's.

And disparities continue between black and white infants. Genesee County's average black infant death rate of 22.5, from 2002-04 is nearly three times higher than for white infants.

Programs are in place to reverse the trend, said Lori Kunkell of the Greater Flint Health Coalition, including the federal REACH 2010 project, which addresses racism in workplaces, the community and the health care system. The health coalition is home to the African American Family Resource Information Center, which connects mothers-to-be with community groups and agencies that help them raise a healthy infant, such as offering breastfeeding support groups.

Genesee County also has a Fetal Infant Mortality Review team that reviews each fetal and infant death to determine the cause.

County health officials were not available for comment Monday.

On the Net:

Additional infant mortality data is available online at www.michigan.gov/mdch.

QUICK TAKE

City rankings
Flint's infant mortality* rate exceeded that of other Michigan cities in 2004:

City rate**

Flint 15.9

Detroit 15.5

Pontiac 15.4

Muskegon 13.0

Southfield 10.8

* Defined as death before the first birthday.

** Rates are per 1,000 live births.

Source: Michigan Department of Community Health Help line

Black infants in Genesee County die before their first birthday at a rate nearly three times that of whites.

Pregnant women can call for assistance from the African American Family Resource Information Center at (810) 237-4226, Monday-Friday.

MIRS

February 13, 2006

Senate To Move On DHS Rule Ban

The Senate is expected to move legislation Tuesday to stop the Gov. Jennifer **Granholt** administration from using administrative rules that loosen up access to employee information, require the implementation of adult foster care commissions and allow collective bargaining entities to automatically qualify under certain rules.

Adult foster care facility owners and the Coalition for Affordable and Quality Care — believe the Department of Human Service (DHS) and the Department of Community Health (DCH) were spoon-fed the suggested changes from union groups looking to boost membership during the tenure of a Democratic governor.

The DHS and DCH think the opposition is jumping too far ahead by assuming the changes are set in stone. The rules haven't been presented to the Legislature, which makes them preliminary in nature, a fact the DHS and DCH continually pointed out to the opposition.

"The proposed rules are bad policy — they are bad for job providers, bad for the economy and bad for Michigan," said Senate Majority Leader Ken **Sikkema** (R-Wyoming). "As the Jackson Citizen-Patriot said in a recent editorial: 'This sort of rule-making, detached from economic reality, is just what the state doesn't need.'"

DHS officials were unable to provide a response by *MIRS*' deadline.

SB 1026, SB 1027, SB 1028, SB 1029 and SB 1030 were prompted by a rule change being considered by the state DHS for 5,000 Adult Foster Care and Home for the Aged businesses. The House is gearing up to address the bills in committee as they come over from the Senate.

"New mandates and regulations from Lansing will only compound the struggles facing job providers in Michigan," said House Speaker Craig **DeROCHE**, (R-Novi). "This kind of bureaucratic meddling is what's causing too many businesses to locate in neighboring states."

Republicans argue that if these rules are promulgated, Michigan would be the most highly regulated state for assisted living facilities. It's been estimated that the rules could cost the industry \$35 million per year.

Michigan business

A BREAK ON ENERGY COSTS: Heat, gas prices cool off

Warm weather and conservation efforts credited

February 14, 2006

BY ALEJANDRO BODIPO-MEMBA
FREE PRESS BUSINESS WRITER

Thousands of Michigan residents benefited from lower home heating costs in January as warmer-than-expected temperatures and increased conservation efforts combined to drive bills down as much as 20%.

At the same time, gasoline prices at Michigan's pumps fell throughout January.

The average Michigan household saw its monthly energy bill drop from \$281 in December to an average of \$226 last month, according to **DTE Energy Corp.'s MichCon** utility unit. Customers of **CMS Energy Corp.'s Consumers Energy**, meanwhile, have seen their January bills decline in the range of \$40 to \$50 a month since December when costs averaged between \$180 and \$190 a month for the average customer.

An average household is defined as one that uses about 20 mcf (thousand cubic feet) a month during the winter. In January, residents in southeastern Michigan used an average of about 16 mcf, according to officials at DTE.

Jackson-based Consumers Energy provides natural gas to about 1.7 million customers throughout much of the Lower Peninsula, while MichCon serves 1.2 million in southeast Michigan. Both of Michigan's largest utilities said they saw substantial decreases in demand for natural gas last month, a signal that people were using less.

Last month was the warmest January recorded, according to the **National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration's** Climatic Data Center in North Carolina. Michigan experienced its warmest January -- 30.3 degrees on average -- in 112 years. That's about 10 degrees warmer than the average January temperature. Despite the recent barrage of snowstorms on the Eastern seaboard, climatic experts expect February to be equally as temperate as January throughout the United States.

Loretta Green, a conservation conscious Detroit resident, saw tangible results from her efforts to use less energy last month.

"My January bill went down to \$190 from \$350 in December," said the 31-year-old librarian at **Marygrove College** in Detroit. She owns a duplex in Detroit built in 1922. "I've been turning down my heat to 65 from 70 degrees."

Green also covers all of her windows with plastic and has reinsulated her front door. In the evening she wears sweaters and blankets to keep warm.

Natural gas declines

Nationally, March delivery of natural gas futures dropped 7 cents to close at \$7.24 per million British thermal units (BTUs). It was the lowest closing price since July.

The price of natural gas, the resource used most widely to heat Michigan homes, has fallen for six straight trading days, which marks the longest decline since autumn 2005. In addition, a

recent report from the U.S. Department of Energy said natural gas supplies are up 23% for the week ended Feb. 3, compared to a year ago.

"Obviously it's a pleasant scenario for customers," said Jeffrey Holyfield, a spokesman for Consumers Energy. "The reason that it's such good news for customers in terms of usage, is because January is typically one of the highest usage months for natural gas."

"We're really glad that prices came down a little bit," said Kathleen Walgren, executive director of **The Heat and Warmth Fund (THAW)** in Detroit. "This means a few people will be able to manage that might have had to seek help otherwise. I think people were listening and they are trying to conserve to the extent that they can."

Nevertheless, energy costs remain exceptionally high compared to a year ago and people are still struggling to pay.

At the end of January 2006, DTE Energy had 54,596 customers enrolled in its BudgetWise billing program with delinquencies of about \$23 million while Consumers Energy had 68,178 customers enrolled in its Winter Protection Program with delinquencies of about \$40 million, according to Walgren.

"As you can see this week, it's getting colder," she said. "Prices are probably going to pick back up."

Among the many things Michigan residents can do to try to lower their monthly heating costs is to apply for the Federal Home Heating Tax Credit. Residents can get application forms from the Michigan Department of Treasury at 800-367-6263 or by logging on to

www.michigan.gov/treasury. Homeowners who add energy efficient improvements to their homes can earn up to \$500 in federal tax credits.

Improvements must be made in or on the qualified taxpayer's principal residence in the United States between Jan. 1, 2006, and Dec. 31, 2007. Examples include earning \$50 for buying an advanced air circulating fan and \$150 for putting in a highly efficient furnace or boiler.

Michigan pump prices, meanwhile, fell nearly 13 cents last week, as the cost of filling up your tank dropped closer to the \$2-a-gallon mark.

A survey of 2,800 service stations around the state conducted by **AAA Michigan** found that the average retail price for gas fell to \$2.23, which is 29 cents more than it was at this time last year. Throughout metro Detroit, gas was down about 12 cents to an average of \$2.22 a gallon. After reaching a high of \$2.40 the second week of January, prices have come down steadily.

Contact **ALEJANDRO BODIPO-MEMBA** at 313-222-5008 or abodipo@freepress.com.

Find help on utilities

- For information on programs that help in paying overdue heating bills, call:
- THAW at 800-866-8429
- DTE Energy's BudgetWise at 800-477-4747
-

Consumers Energy's Winter Protection Program at 800-477-5050

Macomb County

Macomb Co. effort to house, feed homeless people stalls

It has less than a third of fund goal

February 14, 2006

BY SHABINA S. KHATRI
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

It was introduced with great fanfare in December, but now languishes unnoticed by Macomb County residents. Officials are reluctant to admit it, but Macomb Together, an initiative to provide shelter and food for the region's homeless, has fallen flat on its face.

"We have had no checks in a long time," said Phil Frame, Macomb County spokesman.

Since a campaign was launched nearly two months ago, the coalition has raised less than a third of its goal -- only \$9,765 of the \$35,500 needed to temporarily house some 800 of the county's 1,100 homeless.

Donors earmarked some of that money for the Macomb Food Program, which provides nonperishable goods to area homeless people and others in need.

Because the county has only about 350 beds for emergency shelter, the rest of the funds were allocated to house homeless families in area hotel rooms.

But thus far, only four families, -- roughly 16 people -- have been housed, said Linda McLatcher, chairwoman of the Macomb Homeless Coalition.

Since that still leaves several hundred people without shelter during the cold months, McLatcher said the coalition will work with the county Board of Commissioners to reevaluate its housing strategies.

The coalition is also working to step up public awareness, which members said ensured the success of a previous fund-raiser for Hurricane Katrina victims.

That campaign, the first for Macomb Together, has raised \$250,000 since last September.

"Homelessness is a problem that people don't come in contact with on a daily basis," Frame said.

"It tends to not get the publicity that a major disaster would get."

In 2005, the number of homeless people in Macomb County increased by 5% over the previous year, according to the Michigan Department of Human Services. County officials said last week that the total is around 1,100.

The cost of feeding someone in the county is about 50 cents a day, and housing a family or individual in a hotel is about \$35 a day, Frame said.

"Whatever we can get in will be spent on the homeless, whether it be food or shelter," he said.

*To donate, send a check payable to the Macomb Homeless Coalition or Macomb Food Program to Macomb Together, Mt. Clemens 48043. Contact **SHABINA S. KHATRI** at 586-469-8087 or skhatri@freepress.com.*

Wife torturer from Huron County sentenced to 25-40 years in prison

Tuesday, February 14, 2006

By TOM GILCHRIST
BAY CITY TIMES WRITER

BAD AXE - Ex-paramedic Stephen H. Cline repeatedly tortured his blind diabetic wife on videotape for his own sexual pleasure, and prosecutors say his next step was to kill her.

For at least 25 years, though, society won't have to worry if they're right.

Huron County Circuit Judge M. Richard Knoblock sentenced Cline to 25 to 40 years in prison on Monday, two months after a jury convicted Cline of kidnapping, agreeing with prosecutors' claim that Cline "secretly confined" his wife during several years of torture.

The judge disagreed with a probation agent's recommendation for a minimum of 18 years behind bars for Cline, 43, who walked into court with a middle finger against his forehead in an obscene gesture for reporters pointing cameras at him.

"At his age of 43, I think he's gotta be kept away from society for a long time. ... I don't think 18 years is enough time for a 43-year-old man," Knoblock said.

Jurors also convicted Cline of 17 counts of first-degree abuse of a vulnerable adult - his then-wife, Linda Danks-Cline, who now is divorced from Stephen Cline.

Prosecutors accuse Cline of changing his wife's diet and withholding medication or insulin to drop her blood-sugar levels so low she would become unconscious. Cline's lawyer, Bad Axe attorney Douglas J. Lee, said there's no proof of that.

Cline, according to prosecutors, would then dress his wife in provocative clothing, tie her hands and asphyxiate her by securing a plastic bag over her head, reviving her as she neared death.

Huron County Prosecutor Mark J. Gaertner said Michael C. Ward, a former jail cellmate of Cline's, told police that Cline told him he planned to kill Linda Danks-Cline during a torture session.

"Ward's testimony was that Stephen Cline told him ... if he hadn't been caught by police, the next time he did this, he would have taken it to death, because he said, 'I wanted to have sex with a woman who was dying,'" Gaertner said.

Cline didn't speak prior to his sentencing, and didn't answer media questions as police led him back to jail.

Linda Danks-Cline, 46, entered court with her leader dog, Thunder, and sat next to longtime friend Rhonda Quinn of Caseville, who attended Laker High School with Danks-Cline when the two women were teenagers.

Danks-Cline declined to comment after the sentencing, but her mother, 74-year-old Roberta Danks of Pigeon, called her daughter "a very strong person" who hopes to find a job and put her computer skills to use.

Roberta Danks didn't have the same praise for her former son-in-law, Stephen Cline.

"I've never met anybody like that in my life," Danks said. "This is something you'd probably read about in a magazine, or see on Court TV, or on (the Court TV program) 'Forensic Files,'" Danks said.

"(Stephen Cline) was very good to Linda when he first met her. He was very kind and paid lots of attention to her, and she had just lost her eyesight due to diabetes, so she was very vulnerable." Huron County Chief Assistant Prosecutor Stephen J. Allen, however, said Cline "has shown zero remorse for his conduct."

Allen said Cline lied about where he was from and listed fake accomplishments, telling Linda Danks-Cline's relatives "he was a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Navy and a member of the Navy Seals."

Allen said he has pinned down one fact: Cline was a 1980 graduate of Southmont Junior/Senior High School in New Market, Ind.

And Gaertner said Cline, if nothing else, is cocky.

"He made his own preferred viewing tape of all these (torture) incidents, and it's an hour and 40 minutes long," Gaertner said. "We showed it to the jury at the trial, and Cline viewed it at the same time.

"He had an air of enjoyment about himself as he sat there and watched."

Man to be charged in beating

Tuesday, February 14, 2006

By Scott Hagen

shagen@citpat.com -- 768-4929

A man arrested for kicking his girlfriend in the head with steel-toed boots is expected to be charged today in District Court.

The 43-year-old Leoni Township man was arrested Sunday after police found his 36-year-old girlfriend at a friend's house, where she fled after an alleged fight with the man.

The man is expected to be charged with one count of assault with intent to do great bodily harm, one count of felonious assault and one count of domestic violence, said Mark Blumer, chief assistant prosecutor. His name is being withheld until he is charged.

Police said the man punched the woman in the face until she fell to the floor. Police said the man then used his steel-toed boots to repeatedly kick her. At some point the woman became unconscious. When she awoke the man refused to allow her to call 911, police said.

The woman managed to flee the house in the 1100 block of Napoleon Road and made it to a friend's house, where she collapsed in a woman's arms while she bled from her ears, police said.

"The fact that he kicked her with steel-toed work boots is the legal reason for the felonious assault charge," Blumer said.

After the alleged assault the woman was taken to Foote Hospital. She was released Monday, police said.

Ex-husband sentenced in torture case

Tuesday, February 14, 2006

LaNIA COLEMAN
THE SAGINAW NEWS

BAD AXE -- A former paramedic learned Monday that he will spend 25 to 40 years behind bars for torturing his former wife to derive sexual gratification.

Circuit Court Judge M. Richard Knoblock disregarded sentencing recommendations and dealt out a stiffer penalty to Stephen H. Cline, broadcast reports indicated. A probation agent recommended an 18-year sentence, reports said.

In December, a jury deliberated for 20 minutes before finding the 43-year-old Pigeon man guilty of 17 counts of abuse of a vulnerable adult plus a single count of kidnapping. Cline's former wife, Linda, is blind and has diabetes.

The case prompted state lawmakers to enact an anti-torture law. Gov. Jennifer M. Granholm signed "Linda's Law" in January.

Authorities have said Cline, who made video recordings of the abuse, suffocated and revived Linda Cline.

Investigators also have said Cline altered his then-wife's diet and withheld her medication, causing her blood sugar to drop so low she would lose consciousness.

The Clines, who were married for two years, divorced in August.

The abuse came to the attention of police in April after Cline was arrested on a warrant for unrelated charges.

Lansing State Journal
February 14, 2006

Man is found guilty of kidnapping wife

BAD AXE - A man who was accused of torturing his diabetic wife was sentenced Monday to 25 to 40 years in prison for kidnapping.

A Huron County Circuit Court judge also sentenced Stephen Cline, of Pigeon, to 10 to 15 years on each of 17 counts of first-degree abuse, with the sentences to be served concurrently, court officials said.

Cline was accused of altering his diabetic wife's diet and withholding her medication and insulin to drop her blood sugar levels so low she would lose consciousness. He then would dress her in provocative clothing, tie her hands and asphyxiate her by placing a plastic bag over her head until she neared death. Then, he would revive her.

A jury found Cline guilty of the kidnapping and abuse charges Dec. 22. Cline and his wife, Linda Cline, have divorced since the incident.

Tuesday, February 14, 2006

The Grand Rapids Press

Letters

Don't cancel child support

While Mr. Souter has suffered from the unfortunate events, which have manipulated his life for the past 13 years, I must ask, where is the sympathy for his children ("Not guilty, but not off the hook," Press, Feb. 2)? Why should Christine Souter negotiate a deal to lower the child support debt that has affected these children's lives for 13 years?

The State of Michigan needs to begin paying for its mistakes. In fact, the state owes Ms. Souter child support at the rate of \$100 per week, since this is the amount Mr. Souter would have been ordered to pay if he had not been wrongly convicted.

The state has more than enough funds to compensate the Souter children. State officials collected money for child support that they claim can't be distributed because they can't locate the custodial parents.

The state is owed \$4.5 billion in back child support for individuals receiving welfare and is now "forgiving" 75 percent of this debt.

The state funds the "work first" program through the Friend of the Court to assist non-custodial parents with employment.

The state put \$990,000 into the Healthy Marriages program to help marriages that are not struggling. Yet maintains there are not funds available to compensate for errors such as this and other mistakes occurring within the child support system.

Wake up Kent County! These are our children we are talking about. Every dollar owed to support a child decreases that child's standard of living. What does that mean to us? One more future doctor, dealing drugs on Division Avenue. One more future accountant, robbing the corner liquor store.

DAWN SWAFFORD

The Association for Children

Grand Rapids Press

Letters

February 14, 2006

State owes Souter

Mr. Souter should not have to owe back child support after his wrongful conviction in 1992 ("Not guilty, but not off the hook," Press, Feb. 2).

If he was wrongly convicted, why should he have to pay back child support. If anything the state should not only pay his child support but also pay him for lost wages. If I was wrongly convicted, I would not only sue the state but the county for lost wages and wrongful incarceration. Good luck to Mr. Souter.

HUBERT RYAN/Wyoming

Democrats push for minimum wage ballot issue during stop in Bay City

Tuesday, February 14, 2006

By CRYSTAL HARMON
BAY CITY TIMES WRITER

Democrats brought their campaign for a minimum wage increase to Bay City on Monday. Michigan Democratic Party Chairman Mark Brewer said the ballot initiative is gaining steam, and he's confident that the plan to boost the minimum wage from \$5.15 to \$6.85 will appear on the November ballot.

"As prices go up, our minimum-wage workers' standard of living goes down," he said. "Young families can't get a good start in life if they're stuck in jobs that don't pay them enough to get ahead," Brewer said, speaking to a handful of supporters and media representatives in a press conference at the UAW Local 362 union hall on Wilder Road.

The proposal would also increase the pre-tip wage for wait staff from \$2.65 to \$4.35.

Harry Bullock, 28, of Flint, joined the press tour, which ran from Port Huron to Flint and Saginaw before finishing up in Bay City. He said he earns minimum wage at a Rally's restaurant, and it makes for tight times.

"It's hard to live," he said. "It's hard to get by. I make just enough money to function."

David Lagstein, head organizer for the Michigan Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, said his coalition helped pass similar legislation in Florida last year.

The federal minimum wage was last raised in 1997.

"We want to make sure people get a fair and decent wage," Brewer said.

State Rep. Jeff Mayes, D-Bangor Township, also spoke at the event.

"Minimum wage," he said, "is a critical tool for fighting poverty. We want work to pay more than welfare."

Fifteen states have raised their minimum wage above that of the federal minimum, some by legislative action and some through ballot initiatives.

The Michigan House of Representatives recently voted down a Senate bill to increase the state's minimum wage from \$5.15 to \$7.15.

Petitioners need to collect 320,000 signatures by June 1 to have the question put to voters on Nov. 7. If successful, the new wages would take effect on Jan. 1. Future increases would be linked to inflation.

Elaine Keyser of Bay City, an officer with the Local 362 retirees group, said she's already collected more than 300 signatures. She picked up more petitions on Monday.

"I have a lot of people in my family that are affected by this," she said.

An estimated 400,000 Michigan workers now earn less than the proposed \$6.85 minimum.

For more information about the ballot initiative, visit www.mineedsaraise.org.

- Crystal Harmon writes about consumer affairs for The Times. She may be reached at 894-9643 or by e-mail at charmon@bc-times.com.

U.S. poverty must be tackled

FLINT JOURNAL LETTER TO THE EDITOR

CORUNNA

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION Tuesday, February 14, 2006

JOURNAL READER

When will George Bush address the issue of poverty in America? Out of all children in the U.S. under age 18, 13 million are impoverished, or 17.8 percent, according to the National Poverty Center at the University of Michigan. How can we spend nearly a half-trillion dollars on a war, but yet can't end poverty in America?

David Baumgras
Corunna



JENNIFER M. GRANHOLM
GOVERNOR

STATE OF MICHIGAN
MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
LANSING



MARIANNE UDOW
DIRECTOR

News Release

Contact: Stepheni Schlinker or Maureen Sorbet (517) 373-7394

Muskegon County collaborative receives \$150,000 Great Start Collaborative grant

Early Childhood Investment Corporation grants focus on early childhood development and care

February 14, 2006

MUSKEGON – Today the superintendent of the Muskegon Area ISD will join board members of the Early Childhood Investment Corporation (ECIC) and local legislators to celebrate a \$150,000 grant to support a local Great Start Collaborative that will strengthen early childhood development and care in Muskegon County.

Michigan Department of Human Services director Marianne Udow and ECIC chief operating officer Mike Foley presented a ceremonial check to Dr. Susan Meston, Muskegon Area ISD Superintendent.

From the day she took office, Governor Jennifer M. Granholm has maintained that early childhood development and care is a critical investment in the economic viability of the state.

"Children learn more from birth to age three than at any other time, setting the stage for future success in school and in life," Granholm said. "High-quality early childhood development and care is a wise investment in our children and our economy."

The Early Childhood Investment Corporation, which the Governor announced in her 2005 State of the State address, is developing the framework for effective early childhood development and care programs through partnerships with local collaboratives around the state. The local Great Start Collaboratives will use the grant money from the ECIC to conduct a community assessment and develop a strategic plan for the development of a comprehensive system of early childhood services and supports, accessible to all children from birth to kindergarten and their families.

"These grants will help bring together the public and private sectors, including government, business, civic, faith, education, and community groups to develop a long-standing, sustained focus on early learning and childhood development," said Mike Foley. "The board was able to award this first round of grants with the resources currently available, and is committed to funding Great Start Collaboratives throughout the state as new funding sources are identified."

Intermediate school districts will act as fiduciaries for the grants. In addition to Muskegon Area ISD, 13 other ISDs and RESAs around the state were also awarded funding for planning and/or implementation of Great Start Collaboratives.

-MORE-

“Children who participate in high-quality early childhood development programs are better prepared to enter elementary school, are more likely to pursue secondary education and have lower dropout rates and higher high school graduation rates,” DHS Director Marianne Udow said. “By improving the skills of a large fraction of the workforce, these programs for poor children will reduce poverty and strengthen the state’s ability to compete in the global market.”

For more information about the ECIC and Great Start collaboratives, visit the Project Great Start Web site at www.michigan.gov/greatstart

###